



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Young people (10-24) represent more than a quarter of Jamaica's total population and, for the most part, are actively involved in their schools and communities, and hold positive views about the future;^{1,2}**
- **There are many problems facing the youth today, such as high rates of unemployment, STI/HIV/AIDS infection, and youth-committed violence, that have pushed policymakers to explore new solutions for youth development;**
- **The government, through agencies like the National Centre for Youth Development within the Ministry of Education, has increased its funding and commitment to programmes that promote youth empowerment and participation;**
- **There are more than 1,600 registered youth clubs nationwide, and many more organizations dedicated to serving youth;³**
- **Jamaican youth have been active in local, regional, and international fora, including the United Nations and the Caribbean Community, to ensure that the voices of young people are heard and their needs given special focus in national development.**

Background

Young people (10-24) account for approximately 29% of Jamaica's 2.6 million people and represent an important and dynamic force in the society.¹ Recent studies by government agencies point to a young generation that is, for the most part, healthy, motivated to achieve, actively involved in their communities, and enjoying unprecedented access to educational opportunities.^{2,3} At the same time however, young people face many challenges, such as high rates of poverty and unemployment, that are manifested in young people's diminished hopes for the future.^{1,3} Some of the highest rates of violence, crime, and high-risk sexual behaviour of any age group are seen in the youth population,^{1,2} leading many to label youth as a source of society's problems rather than its potential.

In recent years, the government has sought new approaches both to harness the potential and to address the problems of young people. The concept of youth empowerment has gained increasing attention. Outlined in numerous regional and international agreements, youth empowerment means involving young people in decision-making processes that affect them, as well as entrusting them with the knowledge and skills necessary for them to effectively and meaningfully participate. Through recent initiatives by government agencies and civil society organizations, groups islandwide have devised ways to foster young people's participation and to put the concept of youth empowerment into action.

International and Regional Framework

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), was enacted in 1990 and ratified by Jamaica the following year.⁴ This laid the foundation for youth empowerment and participation as strategies to promote child development. Under the CRC, governments should ensure that all children have the ability to seek, receive, and share information, while recognizing the rights of children according to their evolving capacities, to express their views in matters that affect them.⁴

The concept of youth empowerment was further outlined in several international agreements such as the 1994 Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development,⁵ the 1999 Commonwealth Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment,⁶ and the 2001 Declaration of Commitment of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS. These agreements outline the need for young people to freely access information and be involved in decision-making processes in order to reduce their vulnerability to unplanned pregnancy and HIV infection.⁷

Defining Empowerment

States Parties shall assure to the child, who is capable of forming his or her own views, the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child....

Convention on the Rights of the Child, art. 12 (1990)

Empowering young people means creating and supporting the enabling conditions under which young people can act on their own behalf and on their own terms....

Commonwealth Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment (1999)

Children, including adolescents, must be enabled to express their views freely according to their evolving capacities.... The energy and creativity of children and young people must be nurtured so that they can actively take part in shaping their environment, their societies, and the world they will inherit.

A World Fit for Children, Resolution of the UN Gen. Assembly Special Session on Children, para. 32 (2002)

In May 2002, governments and non-governmental organizations convened at the UN in New York City to reaffirm their commitment to the CRC and the strategies for youth empowerment included therein. Young people participated in this conference as never before, with youth from Jamaica at the forefront of the process. A young man from Kingston co-chaired the opening ceremony of the conference's Children's Forum and presented the views of youth to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and other UN officials.⁸

National Programmes

The National Centre for Youth Development (NCYD), under the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Culture, is the government body charged with coordinating programmes to promote youth development and well being. Established in 2000, the NCYD is currently revising the 1994 National Youth Policy to place a stronger focus on empowering youth and enhancing their participation in decision-making processes.³

The NCYD recently introduced the project "Operation Phoenix" to support youth clubs and mobilize their participation in community activities. Under the project, Youth Information Centres (YICs), complete with meeting spaces, computer facilities, and information on issues including sexual and reproductive health, education, and employment, will be established in each of the 13 parishes. The first YIC was opened in Portmore, St. Catherine in July 2003.⁹

Political Participation of Youth

Youth have been actively involved in the two main political parties – the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) and the People's National Party (PNP) – for over three decades. Young Jamaica was launched in 1972 as the youth arm of the JLP. It works alongside the recently formed Generation 2000 (G2K), another JLP group, to engage youth in the political process and mobilize the youth vote for the party. Through its representation

in the party's Central Executive Committee, Young Jamaica has worked to ensure that youth issues are made a focus of the JLP policies.¹⁰

Formed by university students in the late 1960's, the PNP Youth Organization (PNPYO) is committed to increasing the awareness and participation of younger Jamaicans, ages 15-33, in national politics.¹¹ Since its inception, members of the PNPYO have been active within the party and have also distinguished themselves in the national arena. In 2002, Kern Spencer, a former General Secretary of the PNPYO, was appointed Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of National Security, and at age 28, became the youngest senator ever to sit in national government.¹²

Youth Organizations

The number of registered youth clubs has increased four-fold over the last few decades, from an estimated 400 in 1970 to over 1,600 in 1998.³ It is estimated that more than 80% of persons under 18 years of age participate in youth programmes or in other creative activities within their communities.²

The activities of youth clubs vary widely, ranging from youth arms of police departments, which work with neighbourhood residents and police to address violence in communities¹³ to cultural organizations some of which are organized by the Social Development Committee (SDC). Other groups such as the Peer Counselling Association of Jamaica (PCAJ), also train youth to provide outreach and education to their peers around issues such as poverty eradication, and prevention of HIV/AIDS, unplanned pregnancy and youth violence.¹⁴

Youth Initiatives

In 2000, young delegates from Jamaica and 17 other territories convened at the Caribbean Youth Explosion in Grenada to launch the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Youth Ambassadors Programme.

Since then, the elected ambassadors have been active in ensuring that youth issues remain at the forefront of CARICOM's social and economic agendas.¹⁵ Nationally, youth have sought to bring greater attention to issues such as the high rate of youth unemployment, through the creation of the Jamaica Youth Employment Summit Network in 2002.¹⁶

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Fact Sheet on Youth in Jamaica: Empowerment and Participation



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